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Old-Fashioned Spying Methods Often the Best

Our intelligence agencies are so infatuated with their super-sophisticated spy paraphernalia—computers, satellites and monitoring devices—that they overlook the simpler, old-fashioned ways of gathering information.

Last year, for example, the Defense Intelligence Agency wanted to look down the barrel of a Soviet cannon. Specifically, the military spies wanted to know the caliber of the cannon mounted on the new Soviet T64 and T72 tanks, the most formidable in the Kremlin's arsenal.

DIA called on the National Security Agency for help. Acres of computers began humming; mountains of intercepted Russian messages were decoded; monitoring outposts cocked an electronic ear on the communications of Soviet army armored units. No luck.

Then the CIA was brought into the act. A secret spy satellite was maneuvered so its cameras could take stereo pictures of the Russian tanks. The pictures were then turned over to the photoanalysts at CIA headquarters in Langley, Va.

From 200 miles in outer space,

the super-snoop cameras can take close-ups so clear that the rivets in a tank can be spotted. Determining the size of the Russian tank gun should have been a piece of cake.

But the photo evaluators couldn't work their magic this time. The trouble was that the Soviet tank gun was designed with a metal sleeve for added strength. This had the unintended effect of making it impossible to gauge the caliber of the cannon, even with the best telephotos the \$100 million spy satellite provided.

The whole project—the decoding, eavesdropping and evaluating photos—cost \$18 million, with nothing to show for it.

The United States finally did learn the caliber of the tank gun, nevertheless. The DIA asked the British.

The British supplied not only the gun-caliber information, but complete photos of the tank's cockpit and a technical manual. My associate Ron McRae promised not to reveal how the British got their information; but I can disclose that the cost was \$400.

As it happens, the DIA could have saved the \$400, not to mention the \$18 million, by asking the French. They did even better than the British. They got the information for nothing, with dinner and drinks thrown in.

How? Simple enough. The French military attache in Moscow simply told a Soviet military liaison officer

how much he admired their new tanks. The Russian was delighted to show off the Kremlin's military technology. He took the French attache on a tour of a tank base, showed him the gun, the ammunition and let him look inside the cockpit—and took him to dinner, to boot.